What Could Have Been

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What Could Have Been

by TheCosmicPebble

Summary

A 5+1 fic: five scenarios that could have happened, versus the one that actually did.

Will and Hannibal discuss how things could have turned out differently.

What Could Have Been

The fire crackles. The room is warm and dim, orange light dancing across their faces. They can't escape the winter chill that slithers through the cracks of their log cabin, so they huddle together with an afghan blanket. Will is glued to the television, watching a nature documentary, while Hannibal is reading an old copy of Vogue.

Will suddenly lets out a soft gasp. "Look."

Hannibal lifts his head. A large elk moves across the screen, and as he surveys the area his massive antlers brush against the tree branches. He moves silently despite his size.

"Beautiful," Hannibal comments. "Such a majestic creature."

"I don't get how someone could hunt something so beautiful. Just for the hell of it." Will frowned. "That thing hasn't done anything to deserve being shot."

"People, on the other hand..." Hannibal smiles, leaning to kiss Will on the temple. Will laughs.

"If you told me," he says, "years ago, that this is where I'd end up, I'd tell you that you were insane."

"You didn't expect to be with a murderer? Didn't consider it even once?"

"No, I didn't, actually. The thought never really crossed my mind." Will sneers at him. "Neither did the thought that I'd be a killer, too."

"Life tends to throw curveballs at you, does it not?"

"Certainly. But I'm glad things turned out the way they did." Will pecks him on the lips. "After many trials and tribulations. We had so many different potential pathways in our lives. Our life map probably looks like the Beltway."

Hannibal chuckles. "And it's interesting to think about how many different choices we could have made. How different things would be if we'd chosen to turn left instead of right, north instead of south."

"Isn't it dangerous to dwell on what could have been? Shouldn't we be focused on the present? After all, the teacup has already been broken."

"Of course. But that doesn't mean we can't reflect." Hannibal nuzzles his face into Will's shoulder, kissing him on the neck. "It doesn't mean that we should ignore the past completely."

"Okay, then." Will pats him on the head. "Reflect with me. Let's talk about what could have been."

We Could Disappear Now

"The most glaring example I can think of is the night before I stabbed you." Hannibal reaches around to caress Will's stomach. He traces the wide scar gently with his fingers, almost apologetically. "When I offered up the opportunity to leave early."

"Oh, man." Will leans his head back. "The greatest mistake I've ever made was refusing that offer. I could have saved us so much trouble." He chuckles, but not with humor. His face has flushed red.

"Again, there is no need for regret." Hannibal pulls him close. The television program has been long forgotten, the sound on mute. "We are merely entertaining possibilities."

"I'll entertain the possibility that I agreed to go. So, you tell me-- what would have happened then?"

"We could disappear now. Tonight."

Will turned his head to look at Hannibal, searching for any sign of deceit or manipulation. There was nothing-- just that blank stare that he always held.

"Feed your dogs," he continued, "leave a note for Alana and Jack, and never see either of them again." He smiled softly. "Almost polite."

Will stayed quiet for a long while. After all of this planning, all of this artifice, he'd never considered just...leaving. He'd despaired for months over what he was going to do when the day finally came, and he often found himself wanting to go with Hannibal. He just didn't want to deal with the bloodshed that was bound to come with that choice. He didn't want to see Jack, his colleague, his friend, murdered in cold blood.

He didn't want to side with a killer.

"I...the thought never really crossed my mind, to be honest." He rubbed his temple, staring down at the floor. The office was dark, so it was hard to pick up on Hannibal's microexpressions. He wondered if that was intentional.

"What is stopping you from agreeing right away?" Hannibal tilted his head. "What holds you back? Because if your allegiance lies with me, then you would have already agreed."

Will felt his heart sink down to his stomach. He slowly lifted his gaze up to Hannibal's, noticing a glint in his eye.

"...You already know," he said softly.

"No matter what happens, we are about to make some big headlines, Will. I'm glad that Freddie Lounds is still around to enjoy the story."

Will closed his eyes and slumped down in his chair, defeated.

"Tell me what holds you back."

"My morality. Desperately trying to hang on by a thread." He sighed. "Even though I've already bridged the gap between morally grey and just plain evil. I've destroyed everyone in my wake."

"We've spoken of this. Destruction and evil are not connected. Are thunderstorms evil? Hurricanes, tsunamis?" He leaned forward towards Will. "The redwoods would not flourish without the wildfires."

"I don't know why I'm still trying to hang on. Trying to do the right thing when all I've been doing is wrong."

"You don't want to face who you truly are. And that's understandable, up to a point. I believe we've reached that point." He frowned. "You have deceived me, Will."

"I have. But I also haven't." Without thinking, he reached forward and grabbed Hannibal's hand. "Killing Randall, displaying his body the way I did-- that was the truth. All of that was the truth."

"Of course. I saw it with my own eyes. But you were working with Jack Crawford the whole time, making sure you were granted immunity. None of it counts."

"Hannibal, it was the best I've ever felt in my life. You have to believe me."

"Oh, I believe you. I believe you because I've felt that same feeling myself, many times. The only issue is that you have rejected it." He narrowed his eyes. "What were you hoping to gain, Will? What were you hoping that living this double life would accomplish?"

"I wanted Jack to know the truth about you. I wanted...I wanted people to look at me and see me as a hero who saved the country from a serial killer. Someone who they can trust, who they can love." Will shook his head. "As of right now, I don't think anyone could be capable of loving me. I have to redeem myself."

"But would that really be worth it? In the end, there will only be traumatized people, unable to separate the relationship between you and me. And that's all assuming that Jack wins, and you truly have saved the country from me."

"You don't think he's going to win."

"Even if you've given away every single one of my tactics, I still have the element of surprise. It is my house. I am the one with expertise in this field. I am taller and fitter than Jack. Were you under the impression this whole time that Jack was going to win?"

"I never thought about the logistics of who would actually win. I only thought about who I wanted to win. And every day, the answer was different."

"On the days that you chose me, what was going through your mind?"

"How much Jack has mistreated me. How little I have waiting for me here. The feeling of your hands on mine." Will glanced down at his hand, which was still laced with Hannibal's. "The warmth that I felt when I killed Randall, and how I could feel that all the time at your dinner table. More often than not, I chose you, Hannibal. I promise you that."

"But your morality holds you back, as you said."

"If I went with you, it would mean that this entire life I've built up was a lie. I was never a good person. I was never the FBI profiler who was saving lives. I was never trustworthy or lovable."

"Just because you aren't who you thought you were doesn't make you unlovable." Hannibal squeezed his hand. "You are not unlovable, Will."

"How can you be sure?"

"What has to happen for you to be sure of something?"

"I see it. I feel it. I experience it."

"Then I am absolutely sure that you are lovable."

Will bit his lip. "Are you..."

Hannibal reached up and cradled Will's cheek in his hand. Will felt his body relax.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

"I forgive you, Will." Hannibal ran his thumb along Will's cheek. "I always planned on forgiving you."

"Don't lie. Don't say you've forgiven me if it's not true."

"Have you forgiven me? For the pain I've caused you?"

"Yes, because you undid your mistake. You set me free, and you've become my only friend."

"I feel the same way." Hannibal's thumb lingered near Will's lips. "You can undo your mistakes. Don't deny yourself the life you really want, Will. Don't deny my forgiveness and label yourself as unlovable. Please."

Will turned his head and lightly pressed his lips to Hannibal's palm. He leaned into Hannibal's touch, and Hannibal stroked his hair. They moved closer to each other, magnetized.

"I am leaving this place, tonight, Will. I know that the FBI is going to be after me starting tomorrow, and I want to get a head start. It's time for me to start a new life." He paused. "Will you come with me?"

"Please. Please let me come with you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Will couldn't believe his eyes. He blinked a few times, trying to make sure the figure in front of him was not just a mirage, but something he could believe in. Hannibal held on tightly to his hand, grounding him, and Will heard someone cry out-- be it in pain, or relief, or joy, he wasn't sure.

Then he realized the sound had come from him. He rushed forward and threw his arms around the girl before him.

"Abigail," he cried. "Abigail!"

Abigail hugged him back. She cried softly into Will's shoulder.

"You're alive. Oh, thank God, you're alive." He held her shoulders and pulled back to look at her. He laughed in disbelief. "Are you okay? Are you safe? Have you been here this whole time? Does he treat you well?"

He moved to brush her hair out of her face, and he inhaled sharply at the sight of her missing ear. The wound was healed over with scar tissue, but it was unusual to see something so commonplace just... missing. She noticed him looking and averted her gaze.

"It didn't hurt," she told him. "He...he told me what he was going to do. How it was necessary if I wanted to stay safe and avoid him being caught." She sighed. "I couldn't have him get caught. He was all I had."

Will couldn't answer. The sight made his stomach churn.

"We went downstairs, and he gave me a shot of something that sent me to sleep. When I woke up, it was gone." She brought her hand up to the wound. "I had a headache for, like, a day or two. And that was it. He made me brownies after."

"I wouldn't have done it without her consent," Hannibal added. "I swear to you."

"She didn't have any other choice!"

"Even with this, he's treated me better than my dad ever did."

That shut Will up. He leaned in to hug Abigail again.

"Hey." Abigail smiled. "I'm alright." She shrugged. "I'm better here than I would be anywhere else."

Will turned towards Hannibal. "You've been hiding her from me this whole time. Making me think she was gone..."

"And I suppose that was the right decision, given that you and Jack are closer than I originally thought."

Will felt a rush of shame and betrayal. "I would have kept her safe. I would have done anything to keep her hidden." He wrapped Abigail in another hug. "So much valuable time was wasted."

"Well, we've got the whole rest of our lives to spend together. The three of us."

"Right. Right." Will held onto Abigail's hand, and they both looked to Hannibal. "Let's go."

We Couldn’t Leave Without You

"We could have been so happy," Will said, trying to fight back tears. Thinking about Abigail was always painful.

"My love." Hannibal squeezes Will's shoulder. "I hope you realize that things with Abigail wouldn't have turned out that nicely."

Will visibly deflates. "I know," he mutters, "but I like to imagine it."

"She was miserable. She wanted nothing more than to be with her mother. Every day that she was with me, she became more and more withdrawn." Will catches a glimpse of grief in Hannibal's eyes. "She wasn't safe anywhere, except for in death."

"I sometimes think about if we could have made the world safer for her." Will toys with a loose thread on the couch. "Eliminate the people who wanted to see her put away."

"You mean Jack."

Will makes a noise that is somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "You know me well, don't you?"

"I told one story. It's your turn to tell me one." Hannibal smirks. "Tell me about Jack Crawford."

"You were supposed to leave."

The words escaped Will's mouth in a raspy whisper, his voice stolen by despair. Right before his eyes was a girl that he believed for months to be dead, and behind him was the first and last person that he wanted to see. Leave it to Hannibal to disobey orders. Leave it to Hannibal to make things as painful as possible for both of them.

Will finally faced him. His features were shrouded in shadow, his face dotted with blood. His hair, typically clean and swept back, was now glistening with sweat. His clothes were covered in blood, and yet he appeared to be invincible. He was made of strong obsidian.

He regarded Will for a long moment, taking him in. Will knew he was a mess, vulnerable and afraid. He didn't like to show that side of himself to Hannibal, but he had no other choice right now. To put on a brave face would be to lie.

"We couldn't leave without you," Hannibal finally said, his voice husky.

Will felt an unfamiliar pang in the center of his chest. Hannibal had every chance in the world to leave, and yet he waited just for him? He risked everything in order to accommodate Will's arrival? He knew there was something suspicious about the entire thing, but he couldn't set aside his feelings for his common sense. He loved the thought of someone putting everything on the line just to be with him.

Hannibal reached up and placed his palm on Will's cheek, his fingers lacing around his ear and stroking his hair. His skin was cool and dry despite the circumstances.

Will could think of nothing better to do than to return the gesture. It was clearly unexpected; Hannibal's stoic expression crumbled for a moment as he felt Will's hand on his face. Will stared into his eyes, which had softened.

They had both noticed the tension in Hannibal's office the past few months, the touches that stretched past friendly. The way they exchanged personal details, sharing parts of themselves that they were afraid to show the rest of the world. Will had chosen to ignore it, for being with Hannibal was a possibility he didn't want to entertain. Their entire relationship was built on manipulation, on hurting one another.

And yet, Hannibal was here. He had the capacity to forgive Will; perhaps Will could find the capacity to forgive him. Hannibal had ruined Will's desire for any other relationship. His brain was consumed by the thought of this man and this man alone.

All of this time spent yearning for companionship, and the only person he'd ever truly needed was right here. He'd waited for him. He'd waited.

Will lunged forward and kissed him.

It wasn't delicate; their lips smashed together with desperation as Will pulled himself as close as possible to Hannibal. Will devoured him, his lips capturing Hannibal's between them, gripping Hannibal's hair with white knuckles.

Hannibal was clearly shocked, but it didn't take a long time for him to cave in. He dropped the knife that was in his hand, and it clattered to the floor. He wrapped his arm around Will's waist and caressed his hips. They couldn't get close enough. Their noses bumped together uncomfortably, and Will tilted his head to fix it.

He felt Hannibal shoving him, and soon he was pinned against the wall of the kitchen. Hannibal kissed him with a ferocity he'd never experienced before. His teeth bit down on Will's bottom lip, and Will couldn't help but let out a moan. Hannibal thrust against him in response, causing Will to throw his head back against the wall. He soon felt a hand on his neck, though, and he was being pulled back in.

Hannibal smelled of sweat and blood, which was unusual for him. It made Will hungry for more. He felt Hannibal's breath entering his mouth, and he gulped it down gratefully.

Will grabbed Hannibal's shirt collar and pulled him down to the floor. He straddled Hannibal and planted kisses up and down his face and neck, nipping and licking his skin. There was salt on Hannibal's sweaty skin, and he savored the taste of it.

"Will, holy shit," Hannibal breathed. Will shut him up with another kiss on the lips, his tongue running along the inside of Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal ran his hands along Will's stomach, his hips, and *fuck* he was hard—

There was a sudden loud clatter from something on the floor, followed by a light curse. Both of them jerked their heads up to look for the source.

Abigail was halfway to the kitchen door. She'd accidentally kicked something that had fallen to the floor during Hannibal's fight with Jack. She stared at them, frozen in terror.

She was trying to sneak away. Will sat up. "Abigail. Abigail, wait. Please."

Hannibal squeezed his wrist. He turned to look.

"Let her go," Hannibal whispered. "Let her go."

Will couldn't think of the proper words to answer. He hated himself for becoming so absorbed in Hannibal that he'd forgotten Abigail was even there. What kind of a father figure did that make him?

"Abigail," Hannibal suddenly called out to her. Abigail let out a small cry of fear.

"We love you," he said. "Go."

He didn't have to tell her twice. She bolted out the kitchen door, and seconds later Will heard the front door slam shut.

"We're going to get caught," Will said, moving away from Hannibal to erase any more urges that he may have. "We don't have time for this. She's going to have so much trouble--"

"I never told her where we were going. I hid any clues. All she knows is that we are together, and everyone will know that once we vanish together."

"She's going to be persecuted for something she didn't mean to do, just like she was before. It'll be even worse now!"

"She chose to leave. This is her decision." Hannibal sat up as well, scooting towards him and kissing him on the mouth. "And this is yours?"

"Yes."

"Then we should go."

Will nodded. They helped each other off of the ground, and Will saw a little circle of red on Hannibal's neck. "Sorry. I got...a little aggressive."

"I don't blame you." Hannibal smiled, still a little bit dazed from the encounter. "I did the same."

Will paused. "Where's Jack?"

"In the pantry."

Will walked over there without a word. He swung open the door.

Jack sat slumped over on the floor, blood gushing from a spot on the side of his head. He was trying to hold it in with his hand, but it wasn't helping in the slightest; all it did was spill blood down his arm. His eyes were glazed over, and he was breathing in small gasps.

Will crouched down to his level and looked at him for a moment. Jack weakly said his name, but he took no notice.

"You did this," Will said to him. "You are the reason for all of this."

It was true. Everything connected back to Jack Crawford and his incompetence. He pushed Will way too far, and then he pushed Will aside when he got sick. He went heavily after Abigail, a miserable, traumatized girl, and tried to have her put in prison. If he lived through this, he would probably try again.

He had turned Will into the person he was now. Hannibal played a massive part, but Hannibal wouldn't have even been there in the first place if it weren't for Jack. Will was never his friend. Will was his toy to flaunt around for the rest of the bureau.

There was a knife on the floor a few yards away, drenched in blood. He assumed it was what caused the wound on Jack's head. He went over to it and picked it up.

"Look what you turned me into, Jack." He came closer. Jack squeaked out a protest. "Are you happy?"

He didn't give Jack any time to think it through. He plunged the knife deep into the side of Jack's head, all the way through the skull and into the brain. He twisted the handle for good measure before yanking it out, and Jack's body fell over onto the floor.

Will dropped the knife on the ground and returned to Hannibal, who was standing in the doorway of the pantry with a satisfied gleam in his eye. Will kissed his cheek.

"Come on."

Out into the night they went. Rain poured down onto them, washing the blood from their faces. Hannibal tilted his head up towards the dark sky, running a hand down his face. Will watched him in awe.

A stifled scream startled him enough to make him look away. He'd almost forgotten about Alana.

She was close to fainting at this point, and she could hardly move due to her injuries. Will rushed to her and brushed her hair out of her face. She squinted as rain pattered down into her eyes.

"It's okay," he told her. "Help is coming, okay? They're minutes away." He adjusted his jacket that lay on top of her, now sopping wet and not of much use. "Help will be here soon. You'll be okay."

Alana didn't answer. Will squeezed her hand before finally standing and rejoining Hannibal on the front path.

They walked into the darkness hand in hand.

I Would Remember This Time

"What a perfect ending that would have been, hm?" Will smirks. "A dramatic finale to the craziness that is our life."

"I liked that story. You're better at stories than me." Hannibal kisses him on the side of his neck a couple of times, more playful than tender. One of the dogs stirs on the couch, annoyed to be interrupted during a nap. Then again, chihuahuas are always annoyed.

"I'm not good at facing my feelings, apparently. It's funny how many situations I can think of now." He shakes his head. "How much tension there was between us."

"I was moments away from sweeping you up in my arms and carrying you away, once I saw you in Italy. In the gallery, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Will laughs. "I've got battle scars from that day." He yanks down the collar of his T-shirt to reveal the scar on his shoulder, nearly a perfect circle. "We were so close, and I pulled out that damn knife."

"Who could blame you? You were still holding onto that innocent part of yourself." Hannibal reaches for the scar, lightly tracing over it with his finger. "And I turned around and hurt you right back."

"I like going back to that moment, though. That bit of civility, peace. Just us sitting together."

"Well, it's my turn." Hannibal pats the dog. "I'll take us back."

There he was.

Will stared at Hannibal's back, watching the man's slumped posture. It was unlike him to look so defeated, so heavy, and it made him wonder what had changed. It had been nearly a year, after all— so many things could have happened in that time. The Hannibal he approached now could be a completely different Hannibal than before.

Wordlessly, he walked down the aisle like a bride coming to meet her groom. He settled down on the bench next to Hannibal, who didn't seem too surprised to see him there. That, or he was hiding it very well. Will examined the piece of art in front of them: Botticelli's Primavera, a massive homage to many mythological figures. They stood together in a field, joyful, naked, dancing in a celebration of spring and fertility.

It took him a moment to realize that Hannibal's eyes were no longer on the portrait. He returned the stare, curious about the wounds on Hannibal's face. He rarely saw Hannibal injured.

"If I saw you every day, forever, Will," Hannibal said, "I would remember this time."

Will softened, his lips eventually turning up into a smile. He couldn't help it; he showed his teeth, his face lit up. There was nothing better that Hannibal could have said. The words left a warm feeling in his chest.

He leaned over and wrapped his arms around Hannibal. The other man tensed at first, but once he realized that the gesture was genuine, he returned it with full force. They sat like that for a moment and breathed each other in.

"I missed you," Will murmured, close to Hannibal's ear. Hannibal's hand ran up and down across Will's back, as if he had to ensure that he was real, that this was happening.

"I missed you, too."

Will spoke into the fabric of Hannibal's suit, which smelled like sandalwood trying to mask the scent of sweat. "I know about Mischa."

Hannibal didn't answer. He hardly moved.

"I've been staring at afterimages of you in places you haven't been in years," Will continued. "I went home, Hannibal. I explored. I wanted to understand you before I laid eyes on you again."

"Why?" Hannibal replied softly. "Why?"

"I needed it to be clear. What I was seeing."

Finally, reluctantly, Will let go. He now sat closer to Hannibal than before.

"It's all very clear, Hannibal. I understand." He took Hannibal's hand.

"Do you? Because you have seen something extremely personal." Hannibal's brow furrowed. "I hope that the violation was worth it."

"It was necessary. I feel like I've discovered a new wonder of the world." Will ran his thumb along the back of Hannibal's hand. The skin was rough and cool. "I looked up at the night sky there. Orion above the horizon and, near it, Jupiter. I wondered if you could see it, too. I wondered if our stars were the same."

"I believe some of our stars will always be the same. You entered the foyer of my mind and stumbled down the hall of my beginnings." Hannibal's voice was less tense, but there was still a twinge of frustration in his gaze. Will knew he had breached something important, but the information was something he needed to know. Hannibal knew so much about him, and yet Hannibal himself remained an enigma.

"Your beginnings are not the only rooms in that palace of yours. The rest of it..." Will looked over at him. "Well, I must admit that it's quite beautiful."

"Beautiful. You think so? Truly?"

"I didn't realize it until you left. Its impact on me was never fully appreciated until it was gone." Will closed his eyes. "You have the most expansive, brilliant, breathtaking mind I've ever known. I had to explore more of the palace. I had to enter those hallways to fully map out the structure."

"It's unlike you to confess this much."

"It's unlike the person you knew in the past. But things are different now. You left. I had time to think. Time to miss you."

The corner of Hannibal's mouth lifted for a second, a faint smile that meant more than Will realized. Hannibal's shoulders were facing towards him now, and the hand that Will was holding slipped out of his grasp.

"Where does the difference between the past and the future come from?" Hannibal asked.

"Mine?" Will raised an eyebrow. "...Before you and after you."

Hannibal placed his hand on the outermost side of Will's neck, his fingers situated on the back of his head. Gently, slowly, he turned Will's head towards his and leaned closer. Will let his eyes flutter shut.

Hannibal's lips were on his. They were soft, warm, and his kiss was gentle. Will leaned into it, pressing his forehead to Hannibal's and returning the gesture. They kissed softly, sweetly. Hannibal stroked his hair.

"I missed you," Hannibal repeated against Will's lips, "and I should have done this a long time ago."

"You should have." Will smirked. He scooted closer, cupping Hannibal's face in his hands as he kissed him.

Hannibal placed a hand on Will's chest. "We have to get out of here. Florence is no longer meant for us."

"Everyone is on the lookout for us. How are we going to do that?"

He thought. "..How did you get here?"

Hannibal squinted towards the sun as the warm wind rustled his hair. He held a hand up to shield his eyes, crows feet gathering in the corners. Will focused halfway on him, and halfway on the water.

The boat ride to Greece was not long— nothing compared to the journey Will had taken to get to Europe. This was child's play, but he knew that soon they would be going a much further distance. Greece was merely a pit stop, but that didn't mean they couldn't enjoy it.

"You're a talented sailor," Hannibal called out to him over the rush of the Mediterranean waves. "And you look nice, too."

Will laughed. He'd taken off his shirt, showing off a tan, sculpted back and chest. His scar on his abdomen was on full display, puckered and pale.

"***Did you put us in a Hallmark movie? Jesus,"*** **Will interrupts.** ***"Never known you to be this cheesy."***

"Can a man not dream? Now let me finish."

"Taking in the scenery?" He asked, straightening up from adjusting the small boat's sail. They were close to the shore now. "Enjoying your little vacation?"

"If there's one thing I'm not proficient in, it's the outdoors. Sailing, hunting, hiking...I'd only ruin this for you."

"Perhaps I'll have to teach you."

"Have you ever been to Greece, Will?"

"I've never been to Nashville, let alone Europe at all."

"Then there's so much to show you!" Hannibal beamed. He went over to kiss Will on the cheek. "Being on the run doesn't mean we have to be miserable."

"Can't wait." Will turned his head and kissed Hannibal back, this time on the lips.

They basked in the warm sun and watched with excitement as the outline of the Greek shore quickly approached.

Please Don’t Lie to Me

Hannibal groans. "Will, my dear, you are a menace."

They have moved into the kitchen, the promise of hot chocolate simmering on the stove. Will grins at the smell. He loves the way Hannibal fixes the drink; it's more of a dessert. Whole milk and gourmet chocolate, topped with homemade marshmallows and a dollop of cream. It makes him giddy just thinking about it.

But now, he blushes. "Shit. Did you--"

"What on Earth is this?" Sure enough, Will hears the crinkling of cellophane as Hannibal pulls out the Doritos back from its hiding place in the pantry. He then gasps in betrayal, pulling out the Twinkies, as well.

"You gotta let me have my little guilty pleasures, baby." Will bats his eyelashes.

"This stuff is terrible for your body. What even is a..." He trails off. "Do-rih-toe? Is that what it is?"

Will laughs. "That was very European of you just then."

"English is my fifth language. Give me a break." He pops Will on the head with the Twinkie box. "I don't understand the appeal."

"You'd feel different if you tried one. I promise."

"Absolutely not?"

"You've never known life until you've had pure high-fructose corn syrup in your veins, Hannibal. I mean it."

"Fine, then," Hannibal says. "I suppose I'll turn off the hot chocolate. You can have one of these instead, since you worship them so much."

"No!" Will lunges to catch him before he can walk away. "I want hot chocolate."

"Of course you do." He smirks. "I'm going to save these, and you and I can look back about ten years from now. I guarantee you they will be exactly the same as we left them."

"Some guy did that with McDonald's. I gotta show you that documentary."

Hannibal shudders in disgust. "I suppose I should be glad that I never ate your brain. Considering it's full of chemicals."

Will sneers. "And encephalitis. You want my delicious, virus-ridden brain?"

"Oh, hush. That's all gone now." Another bop on the head with the box.

"That's another good story. Lots of different ways that situation could have gone."

"May I tell this one?" Hannibal turns to him, his brow furrowing. "I want to tell you what I wish I'd done."

Will notices the vulnerability in his tone, his overwhelming need to tell his side of things. It's Hannibal's version of an apology, his way of showing Will how much he really regrets his actions. Will accepts it.

"Sure."

"I'm...having trouble thinking."

Will stood next to Hannibal in his dining room, which was dark and eerie. Hannibal had shut off all the lights, finished with dinner for the evening, but Will's unexpected arrival had put a dent in his plans. He didn't have time to turn any of the lamps back on-- he didn't dare turn his back on the man with the gun.

Abel Gideon sat at the table, staring at the two of them while they talked. Will had brought him there, holding a gun to Gideon's head. That gun was still in his trembling hand.

"I'm losing my mind. I don't know what's real," Will continued, his voice cracking. Hannibal shifted his gaze from Will to Gideon. Gideon to Will. He glanced down at his watch.

"It's seven thirty-seven PM," he began, "you're in Baltimore, Maryland, and your name is Will Graham--"

"No! I don't care who I am!" Will lashed out through clenched teeth. His face was drenched in sweat, and his eyes were cloudy. "Just tell me...if he's real."

He slowly raised his arm, the hand with the gun, pointing towards the figure at the dining room table. Gideon didn't flinch, didn't make a sound; he was truly uncaring whether he lived or died.

Will was staring at him with such hatred, such underlying fear, that Hannibal wondered if it was truly Gideon he was seeing. Will didn't know Gideon that well to be this angry or afraid of him. He thought about another time that Will had raised a gun to someone.

"Who do you see, Will?"

"...Garrett Jacob Hobbs." Will's jaw was twitching as he took rapid breaths. "Who do you see?"

Hannibal considered the question. All along, things were working out quite well; he was truly seeing the full extent of Will's illness, getting him in the right position to frame him. In this state, Will could easily be coerced into believing he was a murderer. His mental state was prime evidence to show to Jack and Alana, and then Hannibal would get away scot free. That, after all, was all he wanted to do.

He had to take advantage of this perfect opportunity. Lying, making Will feel even more delusional, could only work in his favor.

"I don't see anyone."

"No. No, he's right there," Will insisted, exasperated. His hand shook even more, the gun not even pointed towards the chair anymore.

"There's no one there, Will."

"No, you're lying!"

"We're alone. You came here alone. Do you remember coming here?"

When Will turned back to look at him, his face was crumpling, eyes filling with tears. "Please don't lie to me!" He cried, the most desperate he'd ever heard Will be. He began to shake with sobs, finally lowering his arm.

Hannibal hesitated. He'd never seen Will be this vulnerable before. He felt an unfamiliar pang in his chest. Gideon didn't speak or move; he just continued to stare.

"Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead," Hannibal said. That was a small truth he would allow himself to tell Will. "You killed him. You watched him die."

"What is happening to me?!" Will brought a hand to his face, grinding his teeth together as he shook violently. He squeezed his eyes shut, his face clenched, sobbing into his hand. Again, Hannibal felt that pang.

"Will." He didn't respond. His shaking became worse, and he now rocked back and forth where he stood.

"Will, you're having an episode," Hannibal said, feeling an uncharacteristic twinge of panic. "I want you to hand me the gun."

Nothing. Will breathed and twitched like a madman. He dropped his hand limply, and Hannibal watched his eyes roll into the back of his head. All he could see were the whites.

"Will? I want you to-- Will." Hannibal soon realized that his attempts were worthless. Will kept shaking, his muscles tensing. He was having a seizure, Hannibal realized.

Without knowing what else to do, Hannibal reached for Will's hand. He closed his fingers around the gun and pried it from Will's weak hand. He set it on the mantel, glad to have the weapon out of the picture. Gideon couldn't go anywhere near it without Hannibal noticing.

He grabbed onto Will's face, trying to steady him. He carefully pried at one of Will's eyelids, yet he still saw nothing but the whites. Will was far gone. Another one of those awful pulses spread through Hannibal. At that moment, he just wanted Will to wake up.

It wasn't often that he questioned his morality, but there was a time and place for everything. This was not the right time, nor the right place-- but no one said that either had to be right.

Will was someone that he wanted to pursue a friendship with. He saw a kinship in the way that Will perceived the world; he had the potential to be like Hannibal, seeing the world as a beautiful playground with so many brilliant opportunities to create. Life was art. Existing was art. Exerting power over another human like Hannibal did, like Will had done once before...it was exhilarating.

Plus, there were the logistics of it all. Will had mentioned his enjoyment in killing Hobbs, but that had been in a private session. Other than that he was an upstanding, well-liked citizen. Wouldn't it be easier to believe that someone like Gideon was the Chesapeake Ripper, rather than someone like Will? Gideon would be easier to pin this thing on, especially since he was convinced before that he was the Ripper.

Seeing Will cry like that, knowing that he was the one who caused this...he couldn't put Will in jail. The thought of it, of sitting along during the hour that Will was supposed to be there, staring at the empty chair, having to testify against him at a trial, nauseated him.

"...He's had a mild seizure," he said to Gideon, trying to keep his voice strong.

"That doesn't seem to bother you."

Hannibal was a good actor. "I said it was mild." He took Will by the arm and gently lowered him to the floor, propping him up against the fireplace. He didn't want Will to fall over. There was still nothing in those white eyes.

Afterwards, he took the gun from atop the mantle and sat across from Gideon at the table. He held the gun in his hand, pointed straight at Gideon's heart. He then pulled out his cell phone.

He dialed an ambulance for Will, and then he called Jack.

"Abel Gideon is here with me. In my home. With Will."

"Five minutes, max," was Jack's only response before hanging up. Hannibal knew the local police would be here very soon.

"Back to the slammer I go," Gideon said, sing-song. He still made no moves.

"You are the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal said. "You deserve to be in there."

Finally, Gideon shifted, drumming his knuckles on the table. "Am I, though?"

"You confessed to the murders, am I wrong?"

"...I'm not too sure what's true anymore, and what's not."

That reminded him of Will. "The Ripper has been inactive for two years, the longest he's ever been inactive. You have been incarcerated for exactly that long. You arranged those victims in such an elaborate manner. You knew details that you technically should not have known."

Gideon's eyes widened for a moment. "Did I?"

"Yes. You spoke of a church, using the victim's severed tongue as a bookmark in the Bible." Hannibal tilted his head. "Those details were not released to the public. You have the anatomical skills to make such organ harvesting work." He put a dash of concern into his voice. "Don't you remember, Gideon?"

Gideon shook his head, reluctantly. "I mean, I think I remember the tongue thing. I don't remember telling people about it."

"Doctor Chilton has been right this whole time. But that doesn't mean I agree with his methods of getting information from you." Hannibal glanced down at the gun. "Either way, you were already in for life. I don't think this will be much of a change for you. Maybe a few more minutes of air time."

Gideon chuckled humorlessly. "Alana Bloom says I'm innocent."

"Alana means well, but she is wrong in this circumstance. She simply wants everyone to be innocent. She can't accept that you could have done these things." Hannibal sighed. "But I know you could have. You deserve the credit for the crimes you committed. Terrible thing, to have your identity taken from you."

Gideon nodded. "Well, I'm taking it back."

Hannibal's front door splintered as the police kicked it in.

The Baltimore police hauled Gideon away in seconds, without any protest from the man. He walked out with his head held high. Someone assured Hannibal that the ambulance was a minute away, and they told him to bring Will outside and wait. There was no danger in moving him, as it was clearly just a seizure.

Hannibal crouched down on the floor next to him, feeling Will's forehead. It was scalding. He felt another pang-- he'd realized now that it was guilt, eating away at him.

"Will? Can you hear me?"

Will's eyes slowly opened. He'd been awake for a little while-- the noise from the police had woken him up-- but he was still hazy. Hannibal was glad to see him up.

"Will, you had a mild seizure," Hannibal told him. "And you have a very high fever. I've called an ambulance, and the police said that it's moments away."

"Police?" Will asked, suddenly seeming more alert. "Wait. Hobbs. I was with Garrett--"

"No, Will, you were with Abel Gideon." Hannibal heard sirens in the distance. "You thought he was Hobbs. When I told you that he wasn't, you had a psychotic break. Do you remember bringing him here?"

"Yes. That's pretty much the last thing I remember."

"The Chesapeake Ripper is gone, Will. It was Gideon after all. That's what the police said, at least. They're arresting him based on the suspicion of those murders."

"He's the Ripper?" Will tried to sit straighter, but his body was still too weak. "Wait. He was in here. Are you okay? Did I have a gun?" He looked around them.

"I'm fine. I kept the gun with me while the police arrived. He was cordial."

"I brought him here. Shit. I put us in danger.."

"We're both going to be okay, Will. The hospital is the best place for you to be, okay? They're going to figure this out."

"I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm sorry." Will buried his face in his hands.

Someone called out to them through the now ruined doorway, and Hannibal answered. They put Will on a stretcher and hauled him out, and Hannibal relayed his symptoms to one of the paramedics. They offered to put him in the ambulance with Will, and he immediately accepted.

On the ride there, Will reached out and took Hannibal's hand, squeezing it once before letting go. Hannibal crouched down next to him, the bumpy vehicle jostling him around as he leaned in to listen.

"Gideon didn't say any of those things," Will whispered to him. "About being the Ripper. And I never told you about the tongue in the Bible."

Hannibal felt his stomach drop, and it wasn't just from the ride. He'd been awake. Will had been conscious for the whole conversation between him and Gideon, and he hadn't even realized it.

"Gideon didn't know anything about that. My question is," Will turned his head, glaring right into Hannibal's eyes, "how did you know?"

It was smart of Will, to only ask this question once he was in the safe hands of the paramedics. If he'd asked while they were alone, Hannibal may have felt compelled to take action.

There was nothing he could do now. He'd slipped up. He'd gotten too careless.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anyone." Will smiled softly, defeated. "After all, I'm so, so sick. Sick in the brain. Mentally unstable." He turned to look up at the roof of the ambulance, not sparing Hannibal another glance. "You made sure of that."

"Will, I think you're still woozy from the seizure. Please don't say anything you may—"

"Don't fucking tell me what to say."

He didn't say another word the entire way to the hospital. As he was wheeled into a room, his blue eyes pierced into Hannibal's all the way until the door closed in Hannibal's face.

Hannibal smirked. What a cunning boy.

Where Shall We Begin

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH. NOT ACTUAL— JUST THE HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO. IF YOU DON’T WANT TO READ THAT THEN PLEASE SKIP THIS CHAPTER.

"Ooh." Will slaps his hand on the kitchen counter. Chocolate lines his upper lip. "That's a good ending. Nice and spicy."

"Spicy," Hannibal chuckles. "Well, I knew you wouldn't just sit there and take it."

"I'm no damsel, that's for sure." Will takes a sip. "Nice of you to notice."

"You didn't need to be saved. You just needed to be shown the truth."

"And you showed me." Will's expression turns wistful. "And it was wonderful."

"Then why push us?"

Will flinches. Hannibal's tone is direct, not at all cold or angry, but Will still feels a wave of regret. Hannibal has asked this before, but he continually brushes the question off. He feels that he will forever have to explain himself— why he did what he did that night. Nothing is ever going to be enough. The true answer, the one he wants to give, could irritate Hannibal.

They are telling many truths tonight, though. Perhaps now is the time.

"I couldn't live with you, with myself, after everything we did," he finally says. "I felt like I had gone against everything I once stood for. I had become someone I didn't want to become." He stares down at his mug.

"But I also couldn't live without you. The mere thought sent me into a panic. All that time you spent away from me...it made me realize that I can't function without you." He blinks back tears. "Because I love you. And since I didn't know what to do, I just," he shrugs, "figured it would be better if neither of us lived at all."

"Are you struggling with that now? Living with me?"

"No, no." Will vehemently shakes his head. "God, no. I'm sure you've heard of suicide victims that immediately regret what they've done once it's already too late? Something about actually facing death that makes you want to turn back?"

"Of course."

"The relief I felt when you came out of the water...it was physical. It made my heart swell, and I felt everything fall into place." Will reaches across to hold Hannibal's hand. "I could live with you. And I definitely couldn't live without you."

Hannibal smiles, his cheeks turning slightly pink. "I understand," he says. "No matter what, I would understand."

"I should have told you the real reason. I just— I didn't think it was good enough."

"There are many things I've done that I struggle to explain later on. What matters is that we are here now." He glances over at the clock. "I want to hear one more story, Will. And I'd like for you to tell it."

Will nods expectantly.

"What would you have done if you survived that fall, and I didn't? If I had perished?"

Will feels himself blanch. He can't think about that. "Love.."

"I don't care what the answer is. I don't care if you would have danced on my grave. I just want to know." He squeezes Will's hand.

"What would you have done? If it was the other way around?"

"If you had died?"

"Yes."

"I would have killed myself," Hannibal replies without any hesitation. "I would have held myself under the water until I joined you in death." He lifts Will's hand to his lips and kisses it. "I would have no purpose."

A small tear leaks out and trails down Will's cheek. Hannibal moves his stool closer and kisses him on the cheek, his lips planting right where the teardrop is. Will turns his head so their lips are touching.

"If this is going to be hard—"

"No. You deserve to know what I'd have done." Will clears his throat. "I'll tell you."

"Get up. Come on, you bastard, get up. You've made it through much worse than this!"

Will slapped Hannibal across the face, and his cheek was freezing cold. Hannibal didn't even stir.

He grabbed Hannibal's shoulders and shook him violently, forgetting about his broken rib. His head flopped to the side like limp seaweed, following the tide. There was no movement under his eyelids.

He screamed right into Hannibal's ear. The man didn't flinch.

He had already done everything he could think to do— he'd first performed CPR, pushing down so hard on Hannibal's ribs that at one moment, he heard a sickening crack. That had made him choke out a sob. He'd broken the man he loved.

He then stuck his finger down Hannibal's throat, trying to get him to vomit up the seawater. When he reached his fingers back there, he felt the tips of them dip into lukewarm salt water. Hannibal contained an entire ocean in himself, swallowed down. He'd given Hannibal a horribly bastardized version of the Heimlich, but only a pitiful amount had come out. The water was a part of him now.

And now, there was this. Futile shaking and poking and yelling. He'd been ignoring the most obvious action throughout all of this, dreading the outcome, but he couldn't avoid the truth forever. Slowly, he pressed two fingers on Hannibal's neck.

Cold, clammy skin. No pulse.

He knew Hannibal wasn't going to come back.

He threw his head back and screeched into the night, shrieked until his voice was gone, sobbed until he'd cried enough tears to fill the ocean in front of him. His entire body was overtaken with grief and misery. He was sore, spent, with nothing left. He couldn't breathe,

couldn't speak, and when he moved all he knew was pain. He was bleeding, he had been this entire time. He had grown dizzy, and he knew that he wasn't going to last much longer. That was okay. He could be with Hannibal once again.

"Hannibal," he cried weakly over his lover's body. His voice was nonexistent. "Hannibal. I love you. I love you. I'm sorry."

From somewhere far away, up above, he heard someone call his name. The voice was indecipherable— all he could tell was that it was a man— and the delirious part of him wanted to believe it was Hannibal. He was calling from the afterlife, ready to see him again.

Will staggered to his feet, a long and arduous process that sent spikes of pain through him. There was barbed wire inside of him, and every move scraped away at his body tissue.

He raised his hands up, hoping to embrace Hannibal, and he was then bombarded with blinding white light. He grinned, ready to die, excited to die. This was it.

He fell to his knees. And then onto his back.

The afterlife was cold and bright and painful. Demons pricked Will with needles, watching over him with expressionless eyes and white masks covering their faces. They spoke to him, but it may as well have been a foreign language.

The only way out was sleep, and he did plenty of that. He dreamt of Hannibal, who would turn to him and sigh in relief, run to Will and wrap his arms around him, oh, I thought I'd lost you forever, my love, I love you—

And then someone would open the door. It was always right at the best part.

He knew he was alive. This wasn't Heaven or Hell or Purgatory. But it was easier to pretend.

Molly never came.

Jack had visited him many times. The first time, Will had desperately reached for him, wanting to ask something urgent. Jack leaned forward, intrigued, wide-eyed, and was very let down by what Will had actually said.

"Cremate him," Will begged, "and give him to me."

After all of the procedures and the worst of the pain was over, he pressed Will for answers— he spoke to him in stern tones, asking him what he remembered. Did Hannibal kidnap him, did Hannibal attack him, how did Francis Dolarhyde end up dead on the cliff side. Are you guilty, Will? Are you guilty?

Yes, but not for the reasons you think.

He'd somehow ended up with a lawyer. Someone to advocate in his favor, to get onto Jack for unfair questioning. My client is sick. My client is not mentally ready to answer your questions. My client, my client, my client. I am nothing more to you than business, Will thought.

Once he got out of the hospital, weeks later, he fired the lawyer on the spot. He then went to talk to Jack Crawford.

Jack had put him in an interrogation room, harshly lit and chilly. Will had worn nice clothes, the luxury items that he only brought to Hannibal's office. He looked worse for wear— gaunt and thin, pale— but he could hide it with some spiffy outfits. Never mind that the belt was on its furthest loops. That he had to keep pulling up his shirt collar.

"I'll give you what you want," Jack said, "once you give me the entire truth. You'll have full immunity, Will. Complete and total truth."

Will was prepared. He gave his entire story, adding in things that didn't make him look good, trying to keep everything realistic. In character.

Hannibal had turned his fake escape into a real escape. Before Will could stop him, he'd taken over the trailer they were in, and the movement made the police cars pull over to inspect. Will had tried to escape, but Hannibal had knocked him out, and the next thing he knew he was riding along in the back seat of a cop car. He hadn't cared, hadn't inspected the driver, because he figured he was safe. Cops meant safe. That was all his weary brain could think of.

He'd woken in that cliff side house. His only companion was Hannibal, who carried a gun in his back pocket and knew that Will had nowhere to go, no idea where they were. Will had stayed inside, trying desperately to plot his way out.

And then Francis had showed up. He attacked both of them. Stabbed Will in the face and the side. Will threw some punches, shoved Francis off of him, but Hannibal was the one to do the most damage. He butchered Francis, leaving him to bleed to death on the rocks. After that, Hannibal and Will got into a tussle that led to both of them tumbling over the cliff.

That was it. That brought them to the present moment.

Jack stared at him for a long while before leaning forward, his arms forming a steeple. "Did you have any part in the murder of Francis Dolarhyde?" He asked.

"No." Will kept his eyes steely, his face unchanged. One slip up would ruin the whole thing.

"Did you willingly travel with Hannibal at any moment?"

"No."

"Were you afraid of him?"

"I wanted to get back to my wife, Jack. My kid. My pets. My home. I was afraid for them, for what they may have to face."

"Will." Jack sighed. "I'm offering one last time. Full immunity. No matter what you say here, I'm going to let you walk free. I'm telling the public that you're an innocent man. This is purely for your sake— to get the real truth off of your chest."

The real truth was that Will had killed the only thing he'd ever loved. He was going to be alone forever now, and it was all his fault. He had done this. He had murdered poor Hannibal.

"See, I think that without Hannibal in the picture, it's safe to let you go," Jack continued. "I don't think you're any danger to the public on your own. I'm just trying to ease your conscience a little. Molly skipped town with Walter, and something tells me she's not coming back. Your dogs are at the shelter. You deserve a lightness on your shoulders, at least."

The news did nothing for him. He didn't feel any more alone than he already had.

"I told you my story, Jack," he said. "And it's the truth."

It wasn't. Not in the slightest. But their moment was intimate, something he would never share with anyone else.

Jack waited for what felt like hours, inspecting him, before finally standing. He left the room, telling Will to wait, and came back with a silver jar.

It wasn't anything substantial— about the size of a jar of sugar that housewives keep in their kitchen. It was dull and grey. It didn't attract the eye. The lid was removable, almost precariously balanced on top.

Jack set it on the table. "Please," he said, "don't come back here."

He left without a goodbye. Will reached out with a trembling hand and stroked the metal with two fingers. He felt his heart palpitating.

"It's you," he whispered. "It's you."

Ribeye and herbs for chimichurri. Tiny golden potatoes. Butter, garlic, lemon.

A handful to season the steak. A sprinkle in place of pepper in the potatoes. A hearty amount in the chimichurri. The jar was nearly empty now.

The air in his house was stale. No one had been here in years. He'd told Molly a long time ago that he'd sold it— in truth, he'd always kept it on the back burner. He never knew if something would fall apart and he'd need a place to stay. It was so lonely here.

He sat down at the kitchen table alone. His plate exuded steam— he wasn't a cook, but it certainly looked good. There wasn't much proof of what was really in there. He picked up his fork.

"Bold of you to cremate me."

Will looked up and melted. There he was.

Hannibal wore his best suit in his visions, always dapper and handsome. He wasn't entirely opaque; he was like a window covered in condensation. He was clean, uninjured.

"I don't get a grave?" Hannibal asked, a smirk on his face.

"Too many people would spit on it."

He considered this. "Perhaps you're right." He pulled out the chair opposite Will and sat across from him. He quirked an eyebrow. "It's also bold of you to not fix me a plate."

Will sighed. Hannibal couldn't eat— this was merely to tease him. He got up from the table and retrieved a plate from the kitchen cabinet. Silverware from the drawer. He sawed his steak in half and gave some to Hannibal, along with a scoop of sauce and half of his potatoes. Hannibal nodded in thanks.

They both took a bite. Will chewed slowly, hoping to notice at least one granule, to savor the crunch in his teeth and know that a part of Hannibal would live inside of him for eternity. It wouldn't have time to digest. They would finally go into the ground forever.

"I'm sorry," Will told him. "I'm so sorry, Hannibal."

"I forgive you. I always will. And I will also always love you. I do not blame you. I know this isn't what you intended."

"I love you. And I'm going to make this right."

"Tell me," Hannibal said, reading his mind, "how will you do it?"

Will glanced over at the razor blades that lay next to his plate. "..With my hands."

"Shall we enjoy this last supper, then? One more session?" He noticed that Hannibal didn't touch his food. He wouldn't need it. He would never eat again.

"Of course." Will couldn't help but smile.

Hannibal leaned back in his chair, folding his hands on his lap. Will could see the outline of the wooden chair through Hannibal's translucent body. He took another bite.

"Where shall we begin?"

Achilles and Patroclus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the end of the story, both of them are crying. They have forgotten about their drinks, which now sit lukewarm on the table. Hannibal takes Will's hand, and Will sees that the blond hairs on his arms are standing upright.

"Will," he starts.

"I think I got carried away." Will wipes his face, but the tears keep coming. His surroundings suddenly become oppressive to him. He hears Hannibal breathing across from him, feels the comfort of his hand enveloping his, smells the chocolate-scented steam that drifts from his mug into his nose. All of these comforting things almost evaded him entirely, and it would have been his fault only.

Hannibal stands, leaving their mugs on the table. It's an uncharacteristic move; Hannibal is obsessed with order, always cleaning up after himself. It makes Will feel important. He grips Hannibal's hand tightly as he leads them away, turning the kitchen light off behind them.

Their bedroom is pitch black, and the clock says it is approaching midnight. Hannibal lights the candle on their nightstand, casting a cozy light onto their bed. He then reaches for Will and grips the bottom of Will's shirt, pulling it over Will's head and tossing it on the ground. Will slips out of his sweatpants while Hannibal does the same to his own shirt.

They climb into bed wearing nothing but their underwear, and Will feels a stray tear drip down onto his stomach. He isn't sure which of them it came from.

"It could have happened," Will cries softly. "You could have died, and it all would have been my fault. It could have happened so easily..."

"Oh, darling." Hannibal presses his torso against Will's, climbing and then laying on top of him. He knows that Will likes to have weight on him; according to him, the pressure is

satisfying to his senses. Hannibal likes to be his personal weighted blanket. Sure enough, Will sinks into the mattress with relief. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you that question."

"We were having fun, though. And then we weren't." Will feels a tear slowly trail from the corner of his eye down towards his ear. "I have you now, but I could have lost you just as easily. And it would have been because of me, and my stupid decisions—"

"Stop. My love, please." Hannibal kisses him on the cheek. "I did not mean for things to go downhill so quickly. I was simply curious."

"I don't deserve you." Will turned his head away from Hannibal's lips. "I'm not good enough for you. I'm never good enough."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's always me. I'm always the one who does everything wrong, in the stories." He chokes out a small sob. "I didn't take your first offer to run, I didn't kiss you, I tried to hurt you, I pushed us..."

"And I wasn't clear enough about my true desires. And I was too cowardly to kiss you. And I stabbed you. And I tried to kill you." Hannibal places a hand on Will's chest, feeling his reassuring heartbeat. "The stories are not a vessel to regret the past; it's merely for fun, like you said."

"I should have--"

"No more of that. We cannot turn back on our sins. The teacup has already shattered, beloved. But we can be happy now. We can piece together a new teacup, better than before."

"I just— I love you. I love you so much, and what if you'd died before I got to tell you?" The thought makes Will shudder. "What if you'd died thinking that I hated you?"

"Fate must have wanted us to live so you could tell me. But I always knew. We have always loved each other."

"I felt so lonely. I felt that emptiness, even though it was only a story. I'm that attached to you."

"I'm right here, beloved. I'll be with you for eternity, and then long after that."

"Can you..." Will trails off. Hannibal traces his thumb over Will's soft lips.

"Yes?"

"Can you hold me?" His voice is so soft that Hannibal wouldn't have heard it if he wasn't so close. Will has only asked this once before, the night of their fall, after he had confessed his love. Hannibal always gets the feeling that Will wants it, though, and he is too afraid to ask for it.

"Always."

Will turns onto his side and brings Hannibal with him. Hannibal wraps his arms around Will as tightly as he can, pulling him close. "I will always do this," he says again.

"It makes me feel like a baby. To ask."

"I don't feel that way. All I ever wanted was to hold you. To feel your skin this close." Hannibal nuzzles his face into Will's neck. He still cannot fathom the fact that Will chose him, still actively chooses him daily. He feels like the most blessed man in the world. "I'm going to tell another story," he murmurs into Will's skin.

"I don't want to be in the past anymore."

"This is different. This one actually happened."

"...Okay." It's hesitant, but it's an agreement. Hannibal takes it.

"You came into my office once, while I was working on a sketch." Hannibal kisses his throat. "It was a portrait of Achilles and Patroclus. Do you remember this?"

"Achilles wished all Greeks would die, so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone," Will repeats. The words are cemented in his head. "I always knew you were talking about us."

"When you left, I realized I had to change things a little." He brushes Will's hair with his fingers. It feels wonderful. "I erased their faces. And I turned them into ours."

"...Which one was I?"

"Does it matter? In the end, they are not Achilles and Patroclus. They are one being, blurred together by their love. It strips them of who they are." Hannibal's hands travel down to Will's waist, caressing his stomach. Will laughs as his fingers playfully tickle his sides. "And we have blurred, as well."

"I want to see that drawing."

"I burnt it. Although, I have many other drawings of you," he teases.

"Why'd you burn it?"

"In the Iliad, Achilles requests that his bones be stirred with Patroclus's bones. To be kept in the same vase." Hannibal rests his chin on Will's shoulder. "They literally become blurred together in a mess of bones. I could not do that, so I turned us into ash and dust. Blended us together that way."

"Where did you put the ashes?"

"I kept them. They're in the study."

Will's eyes widen. "Really?" He pictures the layout of the room: the spruce desk and matching bookshelves pressed up against the walls. Stacks of books, trinkets...a vase. Will remembers that vase now, shaped almost like a jar of honey, its lid containing a round sphere in the middle. "They're in that vase?"

"Yes."

Will's heart surges. "You kept them through Italy? Through prison?"

"No one ever went into my home. I brought them with us when we went back that night."

They had gone back to their respective homes one night, months after the news about them had died down. It was the middle of the night, and they had to be in and out quickly, but Will was able to salvage some things that he really wanted to have. Hannibal must have grabbed that vase.

"I can't believe it meant that much to you. That you'd grab it."

"It was more than just symbolism. Pouring them in there, I realized I must savor the life that you and I have now, rather than dwell on what we could be. Savor your voice, your eyes, your beautiful body, before we become ash and dust."

"I savor you." Will rests his forehead on Hannibal's collarbone. "I savor every moment with you, day and night."

"I'm so sorry I pushed you. It was a morbid curiosity that I'm ashamed of now."

"I'm alright, Hannibal. I'll be alright." He hums in pleasure as he nestles into Hannibal for the night. "You and me, for eternity?"

"And long after that."

"It's kind of weird. That my story was about your ashes, and you've been keeping those ashes. I didn't know about the ones in the study, and my brain still came up with it."

"That's the consequence of us sharing the same mind." Hannibal smiles. "We complete each other's thoughts."

"What actually happened is a lot better than what could have happened. I like reality better."

"Then let's savor reality, love." He rubs Will's back. "Also," he whispers, "you were Achilles."

"Then I love you very much, Patroclus."

The corner of Hannibal's mouth turns up. Will's story still rings through him, just like the story of Achilles and Patroclus had. He thinks about the similarities between Will's story and theirs, and how accurate his sketch really had been. They did share the same mind. They shared the same soul.

He kisses Will's lips once, deeply and lovingly, before bidding him goodnight.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the love on this short fic!

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